

## FROM FAMINE TO HARVEST

Pentecost 24 Year B

Ruth 1:1-18; Ps 146; Heb 9:11-14; Mk 12:28-34

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The noted English journalist, short-story writer, poet, and novelist, Rudyard Kipling, once wrote about families. He said: "A family shares things like dreams, hopes, possessions, memories, smiles, frowns, and gladness...A family is a clan held together with the glue of love and the cement of mutual respect...A family is shelter from the storm, a friendly port when the waves of life become too wild. No person is ever alone who is a member of a family."

Now, I know for a fact that some families don't even come close to Kipling's family ideal, but that's what it is—an ideal of what families ought to be about.

Today's text from the Book of Ruth, is about a family which no doubt was all these things that Kipling mentioned. This family lived probably some three thousand years ago. It was in trouble, and I guess it's because of this, that this story, set at the time of the Judges, has such fascination for us even today.

The book of Ruth begins with one of the most poignant and painful passages in all of scripture. It reads:

*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land; and Elimelech, a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons went to reside in the country of Moab... Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women...and then the two sons also died.*

The Book of Ruth begins, in other words, in tragedy. Three women are left with three dead husbands and no means of support. It's a pivotal moment in time. It's the kind of moment that leads these women—leads everyone—to something new.

During the time when the Judges ruled in Israel, Naomi and Elimelech, residents of Bethlehem moved to Moab, the land of their ancient enemies, to escape famine in Israel. In time, as the story goes on, Naomi's husband dies, leaving her alone with two sons, who then marry Moabite women. Their decision to marry "foreign women," suggests that they had decided to settle down in Moab. What had initially been a place of refuge would now become their home.

But that's not how the story ends. After a few years, the sons die, and Naomi and her two daughters-in-law are left alone, and with no children or grandchildren. Back then there were no pensions or Social Security. If you had family who was willing to take you in, then maybe you had a chance. If not, life could be quite difficult. Naomi couldn't expect

help from the families of her daughters-in-law. They may well have been cut off from their families because they married outside the tribe.

And so Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem. Maybe she could find help among *her* family members. Besides, she'd heard the news that God was now providing food for the people. The famine that had led her and her family to migrate to Moab in the first place was now over.

But what about these two other women—her daughters-in-law? She couldn't expect her family to welcome them with open arms. After all, they were foreigners. No, it was best if Orpah and Ruth returned to their own families. Hopefully they could be reconciled and even find husbands to provide for them. Naomi was well past the age when she could raise up sons to provide for her daughters-in-law. And besides, the death of her sons essentially severed the family relationship.

When Naomi decided to return home, she encouraged Orpah and Ruth to return to their homes, but neither of them was ready to leave Naomi's side. They received this news with great distress and sadness. Naomi finally convinced Orpah to return to her family, and from that point she disappears from the story. Now Orpah sometimes gets bad press for her decision, but given the times it really was the wise decision. Her future was brighter, and perhaps Naomi's might also have been brighter, if she also had returned home. After all, continuing the journey with Naomi meant moving to a foreign land, with different customs and religions—and possible animosity and rejection.

Ruth, however, is stubborn. She refuses to heed Naomi's instructions, and apparently doesn't seem to care about her future prospects. In the end, she wears Naomi down, and Naomi accepts her companionship on the way to Bethlehem.

Despite being an outsider in Israel, Ruth pledges her undying loyalty and service to a woman who could give her nothing—a woman in need of her own redemption. In her response to Naomi's requests she declares: "where you go, I will go" and "your God will be my God." In fact, she says, I intend to be buried, where you are buried. With this, Naomi and Ruth begin a journey of faith together, a journey that started with little promise, and yet it's a journey that leads to the redemption of not only Naomi and Ruth, but also the redemption of Israel, and in the end, all of us.

You see, Ruth is the ancestor of David, and according to the genealogy of Matthew, she is also the ancestor of Jesus. In fact, she's only one of four women to appear in that genealogy.

Ruth's decision is essentially a conversion. In following Naomi, she trades the gods of her own people for Naomi's God. This decision may have been more difficult than we can imagine. In that day, religion wasn't just a choice, like it is today—at least in our part of the world—it was part of your identity. Besides, when Ruth looked at Naomi's situation, it certainly didn't seem like Naomi's God had taken good care of her. Still, she made the commitment of faith and entrusted her life and her future to Naomi's God.

This conversion leads into a covenant relationship—with God, with the people of Israel, and with Naomi herself. Ruth says to Naomi, "Where you go, I'll go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God." But why does she make this covenant? As I mentioned earlier, the family relationship had essentially been dissolved with the death of Naomi's sons. They didn't have any responsibility for each other, and yet Ruth makes this covenant with Naomi and therefore with Naomi's God and with her people.

In fact, Ruth even swears that if she broke the covenant then God had permission to strike her down. Now, that's quite a bold statement to make—to say that only death and burial could break this bond. That's a powerful kind of friendship. How many of us could forge such a friendship and make such a commitment?

This kind of covenant commitment, however, is the foundation of Christian community. In the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, we see that the Christian journey of faith isn't an individualistic trek. Instead, it's one we take in the company of others, in the power and presence of God's Spirit. Ruth seems to have understood this truth better than Naomi, but in the end Naomi came to see that their futures were connected. No matter what might come their way, they were in it together. As Paul says of the Body of Christ, when one suffers, we all suffer, and when one rejoices, we all rejoice.

The church is more than a religious organization. We often talk of the church as being a family, but in fact, it's even more than a family—it's a community of people sharing a journey together with Jesus Christ who is our founder, our guide, our benefactor, and our friend.

Taking the journey of faith by ourselves—as lonely nomads—might seem quicker and even easier, but Ruth understood that the easy way isn't always the best way. True blessing comes as we forge powerful relationships that stand the test of time and the many challenges that life presents.

In the end, both Ruth and Naomi find God's blessings in each other's company. Ruth gained a husband, Boaz, a child, and a destiny, while Naomi found her own salvation in the company of her friend.

The bitterness of Naomi at the loss of her husband and two sons, is not the whole of the story. Ruth's loyalty, Ruth's love for her mother-in-law holds the promise of something more, as does the final verse of this chapter. If we were to continue reading to the end of this chapter, to verse 22, we read, "So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest." And with that comment, there is the promise of the harvest of generations to come.

If Ruth, chapter 1 is a picture of bleakness, it's also a picture of the human condition. Ruth chapter 1 is symbolic for so much of life. God created us for peace, for flourishing, for abundant life in his good creation. But that's not really how life is—or ever has been. Ever since the "fall" in the Garden of Eden, sadness, pain and loss is also part of the human condition.

We see death and decay all around us. The news on any given day presents us with enough sorrow and mayhem to bring us all down—if we could really even begin to take it all in. The whole creation started out so full but now often turns up so empty.

In and through it all, however, God remains faithful, and long after the time that we conclude that it's all over and there is no hope, suddenly some barley crunches under someone's feet and we begin to suspect that there may yet be an Act Two to all this creation drama. We begin to suspect that the God who created us for fullness will not be content to leave us in emptiness. There is yet a harvest to come.

Ruth will become a distant relative of a man from Nazareth named Jesus. You might not have guessed such a thing for a woman who was such a destitute outsider when first we meet her. The prospects just don't look that good. Yet in Bethlehem on that special day, from somewhere just within earshot, we hear the crunch of barley underfoot.

Many years later in Bethlehem, from the unlikely location of an animal's feedbox, the sound of a crying infant would be heard. And for those with ears to hear, there was a sense also that night, that God was still around, still aiming things to move from emptiness to a very great fullness. The famine will pass—the harvest is indeed coming.

To Jesus Christ, the Lord of the harvest, our Saviour, be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.